

How Can we Talk about Sexual Minorities ?

by Mathieu Trachman

Minority sexualities give rise to much discourse, which is more widely ranging than it is broadly disseminated. As much as the question of their actual practice, these sexualities raise the issue of how to talk about them. Halfway between essay and fiction, Marco Vidal offers some potential avenues to explore.

Reviewed: Marco Vidal, *Fist* (Paris: Zones, 2015). 160 p.

Devoted to the practice of anal or vaginal penetration with a fist, Marco Vidal's book, *Fist*, is composed of very loosely linked chapters, mainly made up of short paragraphs that resemble aphorisms. Presented as an 'investigation', the book combines several discursive registers: testimonies, literary analysis, technical elements, and narratives of personal experience. At its heart, however, lies the question of the historical emergence of this practice. Following Foucault's analyses about the birth of the homosexual in the nineteenth century, the idea of the recent invention of homosexuality and more broadly of the historicity of sexual practices has become established in studies on sexuality. This debate has not lost sight of the longer timeframe any more than of the complex relationships between scholarly discourse and ordinary practice (Halperin, 2002). Marco Vidal echoes these issues, without abandoning the fictional register: 'What's at stake is not the revelation of that which has hitherto remained hidden, any more than the substitution of one truth for another. All we need do is allow the living heart of history to keep beating, never as unequivocally as we like to think' (31). His aim is to show that, far from being a recent invention, traces of fisting exist in history and even in the Bible.

The book is an 'essay fiction' that throws up various potential avenues, without really exploring them thoroughly, and is more a stylistic exercise than an investigation proper. That is also, however, where its value lies. As well as the historicity of sexuality, it raises the

question of how to talk about sexuality and particularly minority sexualities. Marco Vidal writes that: 'Fist-fucking corresponds to no linguistic register. There is nothing to be said, or hardly anything, beyond the breathing that gives it a resonance, like the cries of a child in its mother's ears, encouraging us to make our advance, ordering us to hold back, to keep going, to beat a retreat, or simply to wait' (47). And yet what is striking about his book is precisely the diverse range of registers it uses, ultimately setting aside any linear reasoning or assigning any clear position to the speaker – who is all at once a historian, a witness, a partaker, and a writer.

From this point of view, the break with what the author presents as Foucauldian orthodoxy is also a break in tone. Historical studies and the sociology of deviance have long shown an interest in minority sexualities, distancing themselves from the moral and political condemnation which has tended – and continues – to be focused on these sexualities and which has forced their minorities to experience their fantasies in the shadows. From this perspective, these sexualities no longer correspond to perverse individuals, as was the case in medical and psychological discourse since the late nineteenth century. Instead, they are sexual behaviours that shed light on the diversity of human sexuality. They can also be broached as sexual subcultures, implying collective organisation, codes, and specific modes of transmission (Rubin, 2010). This is not exactly what Marco Vidal wants to show, though, and he gives emphasis to three particular registers in addressing fisting: literary evocation, technical language, and the search for origins.

The love of fisting

Literary evocation offers a euphemistic way of presenting a practice that, articulated openly, can be shocking. It also contributes to showing that the stakes and meanings of fisting go beyond simply inserting a fist into an orifice: 'So what impediment hindered the emergence of fisting? The answer seems obvious: violence and death' (40): the violence of dilating an orifice, the possible death of the receiver when fisting resembles impalement, like in Sade. Marco Vidal draws on scholarly references to make fisting into a practice that is, if not legitimate, at least revealing, with symbolic stakes that warrant uncovering. He therefore looks to the literary canon, to find traces of the practice. From this perspective, metaphors of penetration or insertion in Henry James or Melville can be read as allusions. Ultimately, fisting can be presented as 'a victory of civilisation over nature, of pleasure over violence, of mind over body, and ultimately of the body over itself' (141).

For Marco Vidal, in the end, love is the key to this practice, in which 'bodies adjust themselves on their own in ultimate and infinite harmony' (142). Turning a supposedly violent practice, often categorised as sadomasochistic, into an act of love is a commonplace in the literature and subcultures of BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination, domination

and submission, sadomasochism). As Ph. Lejeune notes about the spanking episode in Rousseau's *Confessions*: 'for him, it is about showing that his depravity, far from being the result of ordinary indulgence in pleasures of the flesh, originates, on the contrary, in the purest of feelings'¹ (Lejeune, 1975, 56). At any rate, this contributes to dramatizing something that would otherwise remain vulgar. This initial discursive register runs the risk, however, of making fisting into nothing more than a pretext, as the signification identified here seems slightly speculative. It can also lead to the posture taken by 'aesthetes of transgression' (Bourdieu, 1994), such as Bataille or Klossowski, who romanticise bodily constraints by singing the praises of masculine drives, and thus lose sight of the violence and dependency in which they are caught up. Marco Vidal risks this form of aestheticization, but suggests that fisting is less about constraint than it is about sharing, about self-abandonment, and, ultimately, about a certain gentleness.

The second register used in the book emphasises the technical and down-to-earth aspects of fisting, mentioning dilation techniques and lubricants used, as well as the potential consequences for health and the body. This is reminiscent of what Michael Pollak, discussing the rise in investigations focusing on male homosexuals, called 'the virtues of banality' (Pollak, 1981): without any explicit sentiment or moralising stance, these studies look at the practical organisation of minority sexualities and the characteristics of the people who engage in them, often broached as a specific population. The AIDS epidemic gave rise to a proliferation of this kind of discourse, in which sexual practices were broached from the perspective of risk and public health. Marco Vidal takes up this register, but often sets it aside again in favour of literary evocation. The chapter entitled 'with or without gloves' is not so much an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of using a glove in fisting as it is an evocation of the pleasures of the hand.

Both these registers distance the speaker from his object, thereby also holding at bay the researcher's supposedly dubious interest in his subject, often present in investigations on sexuality (Kulick, 2011). Here again, Marco Vidal confuses the issue. Choosing to write under a pseudonym allows him to mention his own experiences without exposing himself publicly. However, by focusing on the act itself, he leaves unsaid a range of things that could all shed light on the significance of fisting and indeed any sexual practice: sexual and conjugal trajectories, social origin, and practices of sociability. Fisting, just like, from the author's point of view, the hand plunging into the anus, remains something done 'weightlessly' (142).

¹ *'Il s'agit pour lui de montrer que sa dépravation, loin d'être due à un banal abandon au plaisir charnel, trouve au contraire son origine dans les sentiments les plus purs'.*

Fantasies about origins

A third thread runs through the book that is also a classic feature of texts about minority sexualities: the search for historical traces of fisting. In this particular case, the *Iliad* and the *Song of Songs* come to the rescue. This reading explicitly stands in contrast with what the author presents as a commonplace of gay and lesbian studies, namely that fisting was invented during the twentieth century thanks to the development of sexual subcultures and drugs aiding anal dilation.

It is possible, however, that the question is not so much the conditions of possibility for a long history of fisting as the range of meanings that can be ascribed to the act, as to any sexual practice: the phenomenological aspects of sexuality are always caught up in social and cultural differences which explain the historical variations of meanings conferred on one practice or another, despite some remaining remarkably stable (Bozon, 1999). From this point of view, even if we can see traces of a fist being inserted into the anus or the vagina in the *Song of Songs* ('My lover put his hand in through the opening/ my innermost being trembled because of him' – much like M. Vidal notes about H. Meschonnic's translation into French, this translation from the New American Bible lends itself to this interpretation much more than others), there is nothing to tie this gesture to the basements of gay bars.

Marco Vidal proposes a reverie on fisting that makes the various registers of this practice clear. It is a shame, however, that he only touches upon two further major aspects to the question, in the absence of a more materialist analysis. First, he does not use the register of politicisation. It is true that although it presents the advantage of pointing to the stigma that faces minority sexualities, it does also tend to assign them a subversive imperative that offers an imperfect account of the ordinary engagement of those who partake in them. This is perhaps why Marco Vidal avoids it. Second, the degenitalisation of sexuality that the author sees in fisting is perhaps not the key. While, in Marco Vidal's view, 'sexualities without the phallus are very topical' (39), equating sexuality to genital penetration and conjugality remains the dominant stance in majority sexualities. The stakes of fisting are perhaps less genitality than penetration and all the gendered meanings that surround it. The book says little about gender relations, except to mention the 'calm virility' (20) of a bar devoted to the practice or when a man notes, in his testimony, that if he could find women to fist him, he would not have 'problems of violence' with his partners (34). And yet, gender issues are omnipresent throughout this practice: is the significance of vaginal fisting the same as that of anal fisting? Does fisting have the same meaning for a woman or a man, for a homosexual or a heterosexual? These questions remain unanswered by the book, which prefers to identify more general symbolic stakes.

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